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ABSTRACT

Noting that teacher educators should help preservice teachers not just to see play but also to participate in the realm of play, this paper presents three short case-vignettes illustrating the challenges to facilitating deep, differentiated play in typical classroom and school settings. The first vignette illustrates how seldom a first-grade teacher interacts with students during block building play, the notions of ownership and sharing reflected in children's reports on their "work," and block clean-up as a cognitive task. The second vignette highlights the building activity of four second graders, the teacher's need for assistance in working with block play, the role of the student teacher, and field trips to the buildings in question. The third vignette illustrates first and second graders' interest in accuracy in building with blocks, their positive reinforcement of each other's efforts, their incorporation of adults into their work, their understanding of the potential of resources, and how the teacher assumes the role of interested bystander to be educated by the children. The paper contends that school play should offer significant opportunities for developing children's comprehension and understanding of the world, and that school settings in which such play occurs are valuable placements for student teachers. (KDFB)

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Reflections on Play: Learning from Student Teacher Placements

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As my colleagues from the Four-College Consortium and I have talked about play as a fundamental area in the preparation of teachers, I keep thinking about the world of children's play that my graduate students experience. What is our task in the early childhood curriculum? Is it to introduce new worlds, to respond to distant interests? Or is it to help children make sense of their own experiences? Is it to support children in becoming expert knowers by offering opportunities for creating, experimenting, and doing with the known or the unknown? Will they sustain their ideas if we are not in their midst, raising questions and attempting to understand how they piece the world together? Our stimulation, interest, and investment in their questions and statements about how it all

works are necessary not just to sustain, but to enhance and extend their thinking.

In our effort to develop new teachers who care about learning and play, we encounter many obstacles. School settings should support children playing. Children's play should emerge from direct first-hand experiences rather than from something distant, like television or film. Teachers should help graduate students not just to see but also to participate in the realm of play. As critical as I can be of aspects of each of the classroom vignettes I will describe, I generally find that graduate students, once they have the opportunities to explore these issues, will come to some understanding of the question themselves.

I consider the teachers with whom and the environments in which I place my students as offering good opportunities to learn about children, curriculum, parents, professional staff, and other important issues essential to the preparation of teachers. But not all classroom interactions between teachers and children are positive ones, particularly when it comes to children's play. While each teacher described below is also a person who I am likely to use again as a cooperating teacher, each has challenges in dealing with the role of children's play that are instructive to my students. I hope they are instructive to my readers as well.

None of the cooperating teachers is identified here, nor are their schools. The stories are true, but I have adapted them to insure that no individual may be identified. As I offer you, the reader, an opportunity to view these classrooms, I want you to be aware how difficult I found it to suspend judgment about the quality of interactions that take place in the context of play. As a college faculty member visiting a classroom to support my student in his or her placement, I never believed I could do better than the cooperating teacher. My judgments concern what my student will learn from the setting. The role of the critical eye is something I seek to develop in my students, and therefore, it must exist in me. I seek cooperating teachers who have such critical eyes about themselves and about my students. The context for using the critical eye presumes a trust between the cooperating teacher and faculty member. In choosing to make this internal view public, I write as a sympathetic person who understands what it means to create an effective learning environment for children and what it means to

be "on" every moment in the classroom. I have deliberately employed slice-of-life observation. I do not presume to know what occurred before or after my observation. It is not enough to understand the issues of play in the individual classroom; their social context must also be taken into account.

Outdoor Play—Recess

In a recent discussion with a group of early childhood teachers who came to visit Bank Street School for Children, issues concerning play in school curriculum took on special meaning. The teachers and I were observing children's outdoor play on the deck. The public school teachers observed, "It would be wonderful if our children could have time for these kinds of activities."

It was clear that the visiting teachers liked and saw value in the activities taking place; they noted what children were learning from playing with large hollow blocks, tires, and other large outdoor materials as well as from fantasy playing in spaces less defined and confined by adults. At the same time, they noted that their principal would never allow the children to have so much time "at recess."

If play were defined merely as recess, I too might feel sympathetic to the principal's position. In the public school play yards where these teachers work, there are no materials for play. Both physical and temporal structures are defined by adults and can constrain play. Chase is the only available game, and although it teaches roles and allows for interaction, it is not enough to engage children for long periods of time.

If we conceive of play and outdoor time as *recess*—a "stepping back from work," an "interruption in the ongoing activity . . . a break, an interlude, an intermission, a pause, or a lull"—we will fail to provide children with an essential element of school/life curriculum. *Recess* fails to capture the fact that play is the work of school life for young children. Until teachers, administrators, and others begin using language that conveys the value of play, children will be largely confined to those limited set of activities defined as desirable academic behaviors.

The teacher who made this observation after visiting the play deck is someone with whom I have worked for many years. Her classroom has many wonderful elements. I have joined her and the

graduate student when the children played out of doors. She is available for health and safety issues; many children come and seek her out to talk where she sits on the bench.

Should I talk with her about other roles she could play at these times? I know that the graduate student has had many good conversations with her about teaching and learning while they sat on that bench. Should I interrupt these experiences by encouraging my student to instead participate in the children's play? Which activity will the student learn more from? Will my student become the bench sitter of the future, waiting for recess to end so that she can return to her "real work" in the confines of the classroom?

Because I have a relationship with this teacher that extends beyond placing student teachers with her, I can think about the broader context for her behavior. Am I expecting her and her colleagues to take on the principal and try to redesign the context, environment, and attitude toward outside play? Is this a battle that she has a chance to win? Is it perhaps more important for me to work with her about how she interacts with children during classroom play, including block building? To what extent is it my task to teach her how to do something or to motivate her to want to know and explore?

This brings us to the inside of three classrooms I recently visited. My observations there challenged me to better understand how curricula and play are married in meaningful ways for teachers and children. I would like you, the reader, to think about what it is that teachers do to create the environments that promote children's intellectual understanding. I would also like you to think about what teachers do to promote, interact, and become part of young children's social constructs as they attempt to learn about how the human (and particularly the adult) world works.

Block Building in a First Grade

In the first classroom, several different activities are going on during work time. Some children are making cookies with a student teacher, learning to take turns, to measure, to read the recipe, to select ingredients, and to identify them by name and previous experience. Another group of children is cutting and pasting. This teacher might tell me that this is "small-motor activity." One child has set up to paint; the teacher has told me that any child select

painting as an activity and set it up by him- or herself during choice time. Painting for these first graders consists of using tin boxes containing six water-soluble paints. Some children are "using math manipulatives." Some children are finishing writing they began earlier. Another three children are playing with blocks.

It is remarkable to see so many activities taking place simultaneously this early in the school year in a first-grade classroom. The teacher has helped the student teacher to understand the importance of materials being easily available to the children. Everything has been carefully marked to make it accessible, and the teacher has established routines for its use.

I am particularly interested in watching three children in the block area. While highly aware of each other, they are little involved with each other. One child is building an extensive track system that surrounds the entire block area. Another child has assembled three blocks and placed wooden people in the middle of them; a third child is building another and larger building on the farthest edge of the block storage area.

The teacher seldom interacts with this group of individuals except to tell them, when the children are making choices for the various activities, that "Those in blocks will share." After general clean-up, all the children assemble around the block area, so the builders can "share" their work.

Each child reports separately. The boy who has built the train structure talks very little, although the teacher tries to draw him out. He prefers to take his vehicle and roll it around the top, showing how it can go. He says, "This is how it goes."

"Very good," says the teacher, providing a little bit more language about it.

One of the other builders says, "He built a stop at her building."

The teacher replies, "It was his [the first child's] building of a train, and it was his turn to report." After the child shares his building, the teacher reminds the class he has the right to ask if anyone wants to say anything or to ask a question. This is the rule.

The boy understands that he is supposed to call on someone, but he really does not want to leave his train without running again.

"I like your train, it's nice," one child's says.

"How do you [people] get on?" queries another child.

Clearly the builder has not thought about this question, so he decides to show again how he makes the train move further along the track. His sharing done, it is now someone else's turn.

The builder of three blocks does not report on his building until one of the other children says that he built it. He wants to join the train builder in running the railroad, but instead he needs to talk about his building. He takes it apart and puts it back together. He readily understands the ritual of calling on someone to respond or to ask a question. He asks the children he knows to respond.

"What are they doing inside?"

"It's a ball park."

The third child talks about the school she has made and some of its details. She identifies the similarities between her building and the real school they are in. The questions range from the subjective ("I like it") to a suggestion that something could be different about the yard next to the school.

At this point, the teacher reminds the child asking the question, "This was the building of the child who was presenting, and when it is your turn, you can do it that way."

Is the parallel play I have observed the result of the children's stage of development? Or is it a consequence of the reinforced notions of ownership and sharing by individuals, models well-known from writers' and readers' workshops, which this teacher practices very clearly? The children have spent the bulk of the morning in writers' and readers' workshops before coming to this choice time. Is the sharing model, so pervasive in the writers' workshop, equally appropriate to the world of blocks?

In the block clean-up that follows sharing, no other children are allowed to help the builders. There is no system for taking the blocks down. These six year olds are on their own to clean up. The builder of the train does not want to destroy his building and becomes upset when other members of his group take some parts of the track down. He stomps down the rest of his building.

After choice time, everyone needs to complete his or her own clean-up and then to come to the meeting area. The teacher reprimands the block builders for being too noisy and reminds them that they needed to finish cleaning and not to play. I go over to attempt to help them establish some order for clean-up. My hope

is that they can survive this activity without attracting too many reprimands. I'm not sure that I won't be sent to time out for disrupting and interfering with the children's responsibility. I try to help them look at the order and think about who can take on different jobs in the clean-up. With a little bit of help, they complete the task and return to the meeting for the next transition.

Although I am somewhat cynical about the teacher's expectations for these children, I am equally aware that she wants them to act on their own. She will spend her own time cleaning up after the children leave, creating order and taking care of the space. I think she doesn't see the ordering task that takes place in the clean-up process with children. I suspect that this teacher would work harder at this process if she saw it as a significant cognitive task. My graduate student can begin to understand the work that children do through seemingly mundane tasks when we talk about what happened in the clean-up. For some of the children, clean-up becomes as much form of play as earlier activities. I can see the continuation of fantasy about the train and track as an opportunity for temporary closure. Adult support of such activities can turn them into productive moments for children. Talking about the train builder with the student teacher is invaluable to me.

A Week of Building

In a classroom of seven year olds, four children get to spend a week in the block area in a rotation that occurs approximately every six to seven weeks. The children plan to build something from the town in which they live. In some ways, their buildings look like a map of the downtown area with identifiable roadways. The children engage in some of the building together. Two children have decided that they want to build the school, which they place toward the rear of the area. The building is quite different from their own school. At one point, sitting close by, I ask the children who are building, "Which is the front of the building? Where is the playground? The parking lot?"

The children start to think about where they have placed their building. A child from the other side of the block area says, "The children could come in the big playground downtown, they did not need one at the school." Placement, relationships, details, and scale can be explored and represented in the children's model.

The teacher sees me talking with the children and comes closer to listen. Later, she tells me she does not have enough time to spend in the building area. I suggest that the student teacher can try working with this activity to see what kinds of influence she may have on the play. The teacher is less interested in this idea than her own feeling of inadequacy about working with this area of the curriculum. The teacher tells me that she needs some ideas about what to do when she is in the block area. She doesn't know how to talk with the children about their buildings. She likes what they do, but "They don't seem to need me."

Such openings to help teachers further develop their competence occur during almost every visit and observation. Should I cross the boundary and do staff development with the teacher? If I do, how will this affect my student's learning? How much time will it take to engage in such an effort? If I give the time, will I be taking it away from my student? I want my student to have the opportunity to work with the children's block play and to discuss it with me. At the same time, I want to be responsive to the cooperating teacher, who wants to think about the situation as well.

The structures designed and executed by the children almost entirely lack a concept of scale. Much more discussion can take place with the children about their building after they see the actual places during class trips to many of the buildings they built. They need some help thinking about their efforts. Two useful tasks are to help them clarify their own observations and to ask them about the representations created.

The student teacher in this placement wants to talk about the field trip with the children and to explore how it affects their building. She wants to think about her role in supporting such activities. I look forward to the student teacher exploring her role in talking with children involved in building with the teacher and me. Perhaps when she contributes to helping her student, the teacher will enjoy reflecting on her own role and on different ways she may support play.

As I reflect upon this classroom, I am struck by how unusual it is to find a second grade public school classroom in which there are blocks. Although limited by class size and by time, the children still have an entire week every six weeks to work on their ideas about their community and then to "play" with their building,

quite unfettered by adult intervention. This is remarkable, and the teacher knows and understands it. In fact, she endorses it by allowing it to happen. As a teacher, she knows that this activity is one of the ways that children communicate ideas. She understands that the replications children make of their experiences are their efforts to communicate what they know and understand. She wants to give herself time to interact with what they create, but fears what may happen to the rest of the class if she allows herself to focus on this activity. Without fully saying it, she acknowledges some lack in her own experience with these materials. She loves language and dramatic play and constructs whole group experiences in which children get to play out roles in the community. However, she doesn't care about the visual, and she has never built with blocks herself. While she understands that the children should have this experience, she doesn't view herself as a user of this medium. She feels the same way about painting and drawing—"I'm not an artist," she says.

As teachers, we want children to have a wide range of experience. A child who says "I'm not an artist" is encouraged to explore the medium. When an adult says something equally limiting, do we accept it or make the same effort to encourage her to expand her range? Is it more appropriate to help this teacher reconstruct her view or to help her see and develop her own strengths?

A Teacher Joins the Play

The third classroom is a first-second grade in an independent urban school. The children are studying their city. Two children who are working with each other decide they want to talk about a city with tall buildings other than New York. One child has been to Chicago, so they decide to build Chicago.

As I walk in, sit down, and begin to observe, I can see two boys actively building a very large tower. The teacher is sitting in the block area talking with the children about how tall the Sear's Tower should be. The teacher greets me and says that the children are building downtown Chicago.

The children are very focused on getting the tower right. They have already placed tall antennae on one side and want an antenna

on the other side. One child stands back offering instructions to his taller co-builder. He uses motions to support the builder and offers verbal encouragement for his effort to keep the structure upright while adding detail to the building. The builder raises the quadruple block way above his head, perpendicular to the top of the building. It teeters back and forth; he steadies it with a hand and then gingerly withdraws his hand. The other builder, who has taken the role of supervisor-supporter, gets up and motions to help the builder. He holds his hands in the air, as if holding the antenna steady, breathing and sighing as emotionally as if he were building it himself. Then he tells his friend how great it looks. "That's really it; that's just the way it looks!"

He turns to me. "Have you ever been in Chicago?"

I say yes.

"That's how it looks, isn't it?"

I ask him, "Which side is the lake on?"

He looks at it; he moves over next to his partner, and they talk about which way the building faces the lake.

The teacher says she hasn't been in Chicago and is unclear about a lake. The children try to work through their idea of the lake and downtown. One of the children asks if I know the name of the other tower downtown. It is an insurance building, he thinks.

"Met-Life, I think," I say. I don't think so, but there are a number of tall buildings downtown. I tell them I will see if I can find a postcard from my last visit.

I am struck by how the children have incorporated adults into their work, how they understand the potential for resources, how the teacher, instead of directing the building, is instead an interested bystander to be educated by the children. Sometimes they ask for advice, and at other times they may want to know if it is okay to build so high. It is clear that the teacher's goal is to support the two children. By asking an occasional question and simply being present, the teacher encourages this collaborative effort on the part of these two children. One child is preoccupied with precise replication: "You can tell it's Chicago; here's the lake and here's where downtown runs next to the lake"; the other child simply wants to build and to express his ideas through the building process. It is their mutual idea of city: terrain, mapping, and collaboration are important elements in their play with each other.

I cannot stay to watch this venture to the end, but later I get a message from the teacher reminding me to look for the postcard. Support, sustain, understand, enable, participate by being part of and not apart. Reinforce a mutual experience, allow for its sustained creation, acknowledge the work, the interest, and the desire to know.

Understanding First-Hand Experience

Last, I want to tell you about a very good early childhood setting where I recently had a conversation with its leader. It is a place where there is a great deal of caring about children. Every child is known, and teachers do a good job of working individually with children. It is, however, a school that has activities but no systematic curriculum. The leader tells me that while she knows that Bank Street children *study* the city, her five-to-seven-year-old children *know* the city. They have been all over the city with their parents; "they don't need to talk about something they already know." In this school, there are many projects and activities: Plaster-of-Paris, papier-mâché, manipulatives, sewing, weaving, constructions in which children symbolically represent many abstract ideas. Children develop skills in language; reading abounds. But the richness of group life seems absent: Individuals go off to create varying events with little or no center to hold them together. Group building projects seldom take place; almost all building work is representational.

I worry about placing students in this last setting. Although it has some wonderful teachers, its curriculum lacks the form and substance that make for effective learning. My graduate students get to do all sorts of projects with children there, but I worry that their experience, like a good day camp, is designed merely to keep children busy and happy during the long, hot days of summer. Children's play in the context of a carefully constructed learning environment offers significant opportunities for developing comprehension and understanding of the world. Play, when constrained by a school setting, can be pleasurable but may not expand and extend learning. The value for student teachers of such experiences is in having the chance to engage in play at all, which is so frequently absent from other school settings.

Chapter Four

Each of these settings offers my students an opportunity to be in school environments in which some play occurs. As an advisor, part of my role is to help student teachers examine the choices they will have as teachers in a classroom. The first choice is to make play a part of the classroom. Then, as the teacher, they will choose the materials, the space, and the groupings that work best for all.

Play in school is, by definition of the setting, more defined and confined than out-of-school play. Teachers and administrators have a difficult time justifying play for children older than kindergarten—even when some share a common belief that play is the child's way of learning. Those of us who come from higher education can advocate for children's play by our work with student teachers and our partnerships with cooperating teachers. I hope I will continue to have the opportunity to help my students develop a critical eye for their own practice and a value structure that recognizes the value of play.